

Our nation is filled with little towns that are famous. Places like Plymouth and Valley Forge and Gettysburg are tiny in comparison to our biggest cities, yet they remain well known.

Today we hear of another little town that has become even more well known. Today the prophet Micah tells us about a little town in which God’s own Son will be born. Micah speaks: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you were small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Historians tell us that Bethlehem’s population was only in the hundreds at the beginning of the New Testament. Why didn’t God choose Jerusalem, the nation’s capital and largest city, the center of commercial and political power, where people of royalty and wealth and influence lived? Maybe it was to show that God was not sending a commercial Messiah, or a political Messiah—the glory of His Messiah would be His humility. The calling card of His Messiah would be the rejection of worldly power. He would build his kingdom in a different way, starting with his unassuming birth.

God routinely uses people from the margins to accomplish his ends. Think of Moses, wondering “why would God pick me to lead his people?” Who did Jesus choose to lay the foundation for His church? Fishermen, tax collectors, a few religious zealots thrown in for good measure. In today’s Gospel, Mary is amazed that God would even want to bother with her, much less bless her in this most peculiar way.

God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem is part of a bigger pattern; a pattern that continues right throughout the New Testament era right down to the present day. In 1st Corinthians, St. Paul writes: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...so that no one can boast before him.”

God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem is a sign that you cannot be too little or too insignificant for God to bless you. Bethlehem is a reminder to you when you feel belittled by others; when you feel loaded with guilt; when you struggle with the consequences of bad decisions. God has chosen you and me, and we don’t deserve it. Your place in God’s kingdom, your place in His family, is a result of his greatness, not ours. That’s good news.

But this is also a warning to those of us who may be caught up in human greatness. We tend to apply the motto “bigger is better” to just about everything: military power, business organization, even our churches. We may come to trust in our accomplishments so much that we stop delighting in God’s activity in our lives. Standing at the threshold of Christmas, we have yet another chance to stop and change direction; to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins and a new outlook on life; an outlook that seeks to praise the Lord; an outlook that trusts in His upside-down wisdom.

God's choice of the little town of Bethlehem also has something to say about life here in the real world. What I mean is this: Bethlehem had more than its share of tragedies and heartbreak. In Bethlehem there is a burial stone that was a monument to great love and great loss. Here Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died. Jacob loved Rachel so much he worked 14 years for her hand in marriage. She died as she gave birth to their son Benjamin, whom she named with her last cry. Centuries later, when thousands of Israelites were led to Babylon as captives, the prophet Jeremiah would write that "A voice is heard in Ramah...Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more."

In today's Gospel we see Mary rejoicing, but she will soon have to flee with Joseph as King Herod slaughters the innocent boys of Bethlehem in a crazed attempt to eliminate Jesus. And later, the mother of our Lord will weep at the foot of her son's cross.

God's choice of Bethlehem says this to you today: Right in the middle of human cruelty; right in the middle of haunting grief and bitter disappointment; right in the middle of a world gone mad, Jesus comes to you, the living good news of God himself. The prophet Micah admits that Israel may appear to be abandoned, but there is no defeat. When the Ruler comes, the scattered people of God will be reunited, will have security, and will live in peace. While there are real problems around us and real pain inside, Jesus has come to set things right. He comes to console you with his unstoppable love, and to make you bold by his resurrection.

And last but not least, God's choice of the little town of Bethlehem was an intentional signal. It sent a clear message to those paying attention about the identity of the child. Bethlehem is the place where the shepherd boy David was born and where he was living when he was chosen to become the greatest king that Israel ever had. Under David, Israel conquered all its enemies, extended its borders, established peace, and brought about a time of spiritual renewal. Much later, a Roman census would bring Mary and Joseph to the town of David where the King of all Kings would be born.

God's choice of Bethlehem reminds us that God is in control. All rulers and powers will bow before Him. Jesus will always direct all things for good.

One of the oldest Christian churches in the world, the Church of the Nativity, is said to cover the site that made little Bethlehem the greatest location in Judah. What is unusual about the church is that the once normal entrance to the cave area is now so small that only one person can enter at a time, and you must stoop as you go in. Why it is that way? Reportedly, invading horsemen rode into the church and trampled the cave areas, so to prevent future desecration, the doorway was made much smaller, and now you have to crouch to get in.

As you go to Bethlehem in spirit this Christmas, this is what you need to do. Stoop down. Humble yourself. Block everything else out, and kneel at the manger of Jesus. Bow at the bedside of God in the flesh. See the baby whose goodness fills your emptiness; whose love consoles you in your sorrow; whose power will steady you in all the changes of life. Where meek souls will receive Him, still, the dear Christ enters in.